

# **History Of Pontiac Correctional Center: A Bibliography Of Sources Available At The Pontiac Public Library**

*by Sarah Millender for the Prison Public  
Memory Project – Illinois, July 2017*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 1871, prompted by the idea that juvenile offenders should not be placed in penal institutions with older offenders, the state of Illinois opened up the Illinois Boys Reformatory School in the town of Pontiac. The reformatory school was built, according to the board of trustees, to provide "a place for the thorough reformation and elevation of the erring young people of our State." Boys, aged eight to sixteen, were sent to the reformatory school for crimes like stealing horses. The site could house up to 400 boys and boasted a baseball diamond, dormitories, greenhouse, various factories, and a school. While incarcerated at the reformatory school, the boys took classes and trained in a variety of subjects, including blacksmithing, engineering, and shoemaking.

In 1893, the institution became the Illinois State Reformatory and began to house young men up to the age of 21. By 1904, juvenile offenders were no longer sent to Pontiac. Nevertheless, the reformatory's population increased, reaching 2,500 by the 1930s. With an increase in population came a sharp decrease in the educational and vocational training available to

the incarcerated population. In 1933, the facility underwent another major change; all age restrictions were dropped and the facility was renamed the Illinois State Penitentiary.

In the 1970s the facility was renamed Pontiac Correctional Center and became a maximum security facility. In 1978, the deadliest prison riot\* in Illinois history occurred at the Pontiac prison. Three guards were killed, and many guards and inmates were injured during the riot. Today, the prison remains a maximum security facility. However, there are now two new facilities on the campus: a medium security unit and a mental health unit.

What follows is a list of the sources relating to the prison that are available at the Pontiac Public Library. All but one of these sources are available either in the Caterpillar Local History Room or in the Walnut Cabinet that houses valuable documents. The library is located at 211 E Madison St, Pontiac, Illinois. More information about the library can be found at their page on [pontiac.org](http://pontiac.org) or by calling the library at (815) 844-7229.

## **FILING CABINET FOLDERS**

*Compiled by the Pontiac Public Library*

The first folder in the filing cabinet contains a variety of newspaper clippings that cover a number of topics. The majority of clippings come from the local newspapers, The Daily Pantagraph and the Pontiac Daily Leader and are about the 1978 prison riot. Many of the articles contain pictures of the prison after the riot and of the warden meeting the governor. Additionally, there are newspaper clippings from the 10-year and 20-year anniversaries of the riot. The folder also holds newspaper articles



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about the attempted prison closure and the protests meant to stop the prison from closing. The folder further contains a brochure about the prison, published by the Department of Public Safety, from the 1960s. Finally, the folder also holds a few articles written about the history of the prison. There are pictures of the prison taken in 1967 and photographs from the end of the 19th century.

The contents of the second folder are newspaper clippings that focus mainly on the 2008 potential closure of Pontiac Correctional Center. Additionally, there are a few articles about more recent events in the prison. There are a number of newspaper articles about an assault that occurred in the prison in 2016, as well as two articles that discuss mental health within the prison. The folder also contains some documents that catalog the history of the prison, including an excerpt from *The Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois and the History of Livingston County c. 1909*.

#### **PONTIAC LIBRARY COLLECTION OF HISTORIC NEWSPAPERS**

The Pontiac Public Library has a vast collection of historic newspapers, a few available in print but most available on microfiche. These newspapers contain many articles and pictures about the prison in Pontiac. Microfiche copies of the Free Trader and Observer Newspapers (1884 – 1906), The Pioneer newspaper (1929 – 1934), The Pontiac News Review (1935 – 1941), The Pontiac Sentinel (1871 – 1897), and The Pontiac Daily Leader (1896 – 2016) can be viewed using the library's machine. Print copies of newspapers published by the Illinois State Penitentiary, called The Pontiac Flag News, and published in the 1970s, are also available. Copies of these newspapers are available upon request.

#### **PONTIAC CORRECTIONAL CENTER – ILLINOIS HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY (2001)**

*Illinois Historic Preservation Agency*

*Prepared by Wiss, Janney, Elstner and Associates, Inc.*

This source is a survey of the prison and its buildings conducted by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency before the chapel, a building on the Illinois Historic Register, was damaged in the 1978 riot and subsequently torn down. This source contains information not just about the prison in Pontiac, but also information concerning prisons in general. The first part of the book contains an extensive summary of the history of prisons and prison reform in Europe and the United States, as well as information about the history of prisons in Illinois. A short summary of Pontiac history is also included in the book. Finally, the book contains information about the buildings on the prison site. The book contains many drawings and pictures of the prison.

#### **PONTIAC ILLINOIS SESQUICENTENNIAL VOL. 1 AND VOL. 2 (1987)**

*Edited and Published by Elizabeth Harris*

This source, published during the 1987 Pontiac Sesquicentennial celebration, contains articles that cover the history of Pontiac. Three of these articles relate to the prison. The first article, written by James A. Pearre, covers the basic history and operations of the prison, beginning in 1871. At the end of the article, there is a list of the superintendents and wardens of the facility from 1870 to 1987. The second article, also written by Pearre, focuses on violence at the prison. Descriptions of the 1978 riot, as well as descriptions of various escape attempts and other riots, are included in this article. The third article, written by Peg Spalding, is about Thomas Googerty, an artist who taught at the Illinois State Reformatory from 1894 until around 1934. Googerty is a well-known artist whose ornamental iron works, some created in

conjunction with boys at the Reformatory School, can be seen around Pontiac.

### **HISTORY OF LIVINGSTON COUNTY, ILLINOIS (1878)**

*Published by WM. Le Baron, Jr. and Co.*

Overall, this source contains information about the history of Livingston County. Within the book, however, there is a specific and detailed section about the city of Pontiac and Pontiac Township. Beginning on page 323, there is an article about the early history of the prison. The article has information about life at the prison, the buildings, and the history of how the Illinois Boys Reformatory School was established.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL RECORD OF LIVINGSTON COUNTY, ILLINOIS (1900)**

*Published by S.J. Clarke Publishing Company*

This source contains the biographical information of prominent people who lived in Livingston County. The biography of George Torrance, who was a superintendent at the Illinois State Reformatory from 1896 - 1900 is located on page 16.

### **HISTORICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ILLINOIS AND HISTORY OF LIVINGSTON COUNTY VOL. II (1909)**

*Edited by Newton Bateman and Paul Selby*

This encyclopedia contains basic information about the Illinois Boys Reformatory School and the Illinois State Reformatory. One can find information about the history of prison buildings and renovations to the buildings that have occurred over the past century. Life in the prison, particularly how it was run and the goals of the reformatory, is also covered in this source. This book also contains many pictures of the prison and Pontiac.

### **COLLECTION OF ITEMS FROM WARDEN JOSEPH VITEK (NO DATE AVAILABLE)**

*Compiled by the Pontiac Public Library*

The Pontiac Library has a number of documents and items related to Warden Joseph Vitek, who worked as the warden at the Penitentiary from 1961 to 1970. The collection includes some correspondence between him and researchers, a postcard with a picture of the penitentiary, his old identification card, and two copies of the newsletter *Dimensions in Corrections*, which was published by the Illinois Department of Corrections and covers information about prisons from all over Illinois. The edition from March 1970 contains a picture that shows the organizational flow chart of the Illinois Department of Corrections. The collection also includes a program from the 1970 Illinois State Penitentiary Commencement, which contains the names of supervisors and incarcerated men and a booklet containing historical pictures of the prison. One can also view a pamphlet called "Inmate Guidance" that is held in the collection. The pamphlet is essentially a guide to prison for new inmates. The booklet has information about discipline, educational and vocational training, basic rules, and daily life at the prison.

### **PORTRAIT AND BIOGRAPHICAL ALBUM OF LIVINGSTON COUNTY, ILLINOIS (1888)**

*Published by the Chapman Brothers Publishing Company*

This book contains biographies of George Torrance and I.M. Lish, who served as wardens of the Illinois State Penitentiary. They served from 1896 – 1900 and 1921 – 1928, respectively.

### **A HISTORY OF LIVINGSTON COUNTY, ILLINOIS (1991)**

*Compiled by Livingston County Historical Project*

Like other histories of Livingston County, this source has a section on the prison that speaks in depth about the different forms the prison has taken. The section provides facts about the prison from 1871 to 1982.

### **LIVINGSTON COUNTY CEMETERY RECORDS VOL. 1 AND VOL. 2 (1976)**

*Compiled by Mary Peterson Erickson*

This source, compiled by a member of the Livingston County Historical Society, contains the cemetery records of the cemeteries in Livingston County where the Pontiac Correctional Center is located. Incarcerated men and boys who died while at the facility are buried in two Pontiac Township cemeteries: Southside Cemetery and St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery. The records for these cemeteries are in the second volume. The names of the incarcerated boys and men who are buried in the Southside Cemetery are marked by the words "Prison Section" in the far-right column. For the incarcerated men buried in St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery, their names are marked with the phrase "IL State Pen" in the far-right column.

### **HISTORY OF MURDERS COMMITTED IN FAIRBURY, ILLINOIS (2015)**

*Written by Dale C. Maley*

This source is the only book referenced in this bibliography that is not located in the local history section of the Pontiac Public Library. The book can be found on the back wall of the non-fiction section of the library. Its call number is 977.31 MAL. This source contains information on murders committed in Fairbury, a town ten miles southeast of Pontiac. Chapters three, six, and seven all have a connection to the town of Pontiac and the prison. This source is highly detailed and contains genealogical information and pictures.

### **BIENNIAL REPORT, 1898 – 1900 FOR THE ILLINOIS STATE REFORMATORY**

*Written by Illinois State Reformatory Board of Directors*

This source is one edition of a report that was published every two years by the reformatory board of directors. The majority of the book is comprised of reports about all facets of prison life, including reports about the various schools,

the prison's farm, buildings at the facility, and discipline. Special reports written by the superintendent, assistant superintendent, prison chaplain, prison physician, and prison military instructor can also be found in this book. The book also contains facts and figures about the men and boys incarcerated at the reformatory. Information about their upbringings, parents, vices, and even how they were released are given. Prisoner employment records are also included in this report. A budget for the prison and requests for additional funds and staff are also available.

### **THIS IS LIVINGSTON COUNTY, ILLINOIS (1955)**

*Written by John Drury*

This source is not particularly rich with information about the Boys Reformatory, Illinois State Reformatory, or Illinois State Penitentiary, but it does have a couple pictures of the prison and reformatory.

### **LIVINGSTON COUNTY ILLINOIS: A PICTORIAL HISTORY (2013)**

*Livingston County Historical Society*

This pictorial history contains hundreds of pictures from Livingston County across a number of decades, and Pontiac and the prison are included in the book. There are a few pictures of people who worked in the prison and pictures of the reform school, but most of the photos are focused on the campaign the town waged in 2008 to keep the prison from being closed.

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### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND NOTES**

We would like to thank the staff at Pontiac Public Library for all of their help in creating this document. Their commitment to and interest in local history has made this document possible.

We would also like to note that this document is a work-in-progress. We would like to invite anybody with knowledge of library resources not mentioned in this document to contact us at [info@prisonpublicmemory.org](mailto:info@prisonpublicmemory.org).

This bibliography does not contain detailed information about the Pontiac Public Library's microfiche collection of local newspapers dating back to 1884, nor the copies of the prison's newspaper, The Pontiac Flag News, published in the 1970s. We intend to create annotated bibliographies for these resources at a later date.

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\*A prison riot is an act of concerted defiance or disorder by a group of prisoners against the prison administrators, prison officers, or other groups of prisoners in an attempt to force change or express a grievance. (Source: Wikipedia)